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Published in:
Professional Development in Education

DOI:
[10.1080/19415257.2017.1331933](https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2017.1331933)

Publication date:
2017

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Dunn, B., McDonald, C., & Johnson, D. (2017). Evidence of quality professional development: a study in childhood practice. *Professional Development in Education*, 44(3), 397-411.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2017.1331933>

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Evidence of Quality Professional Development: A Study in Childhood Practice

Brenda Dunn, Catriona McDonald and Dorothy Johnson

ABSTRACT

The study examined the contribution of the BA Childhood Practice work-based degree to professional and personal development, including leadership skills, analysed in relation to relevant models of professional development. It drew upon evidence from three university providers from research assignments, subsequent questionnaires and interviews with students. A phenomenographical approach was used to identify the perceptions of learning and affective experiences. In discussing the nature of professional development, the paper draws on theoretical frameworks and the Standard for Childhood Practice. Findings revealed that characteristics identified in these models were evident in the degree, the most influential being knowledge and understanding, critical awareness and changes to values and beliefs. These aspects promoted leadership and quality and underpinned increased self-confidence. The main issue that emerged was the significance of a work-based model which promotes the development of higher level skills; this is relevant across professions.

Keywords: childhood practice; continuous professional development; critical reflection; leadership skills; work-based practice.

Introduction

This study examines the professional and personal development, including leadership skills, of BA Childhood Practice (BACP) work-based students in Scotland and was carried out by staff from three universities which provide the BACP degree. The aim was to identify commonalities of personal and professional growth, as identified by students, which could impact positively on practice. Subsequent analysis was undertaken using Cherrington and Thornton's (2013) characteristics of effective professional learning, Mitchell and Cubey's (2003) eight characteristics of quality professional development and Scottish Social Services Council's (SSSC's), professional development model (QAA, 2007, 2015).

The Scottish context

Scotland is a constituent country of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; however, the legal requirements for education and care are fully devolved to the Scottish Government.

The context for development of BACP arose from The Scottish Executive response to the National Review of the Early Years and Childcare Workforce (2006). This included a focus on enhancing the professionalism and leadership skills of those who work with young people from birth to 16 years. It is key to the early years and childcare strategy in creating a professional workforce who could provide quality services and contribute towards positive outcomes for children and families. All professionals leading services must now be qualified to degree level and register either with General Teaching Council in Scotland (GTCS) for fully qualified teachers, or with the SSSC for the remainder of the early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce. For the latter group the degree represents a move away from predominantly local short course Continuous Professional Development (CPD) to sustained and accredited CPD.

The BACP degree can be studied at seven universities in Scotland by a variety of modes of part-time study, such as online distance learning or face-to-face teaching. As this is a work-based degree, all students must be also employed in a relevant setting and hold a recognised practitioner qualification. Whether it is part of an ethos of entitlement or requirement is likely to affect the outcome. Also the student body tends to be predominantly female and from non-traditional academic backgrounds, on low rates of pay, yet the BACP is a requirement for many of these practitioners to remain in their job role.

SSSC (QAA 2007, 2015) and GTCS (2012) share a common policy based vision to promote three main aspects of professional development:

- values and professional commitment
- knowledge and understanding
- skills and abilities

These three aspects which underpin qualifications 'are inherently linked to each other in the development of the professional, and one aspect does not exist independently of the other two. It is this interrelationship among all three

which develops professionalism and leads to appropriate professional action' (QAA, 2015, p. 28).



Figure 1. Interrelationship of aspects of professional development (Standard for Childhood Practice) (QAA 2015)

In Scotland there is evidence of changing paradigms, for example from distributed leadership towards a capability perspective on leadership with the need for CPD with this emphasis (Donaldson 2010).

The shift towards career-long professional learning builds upon Reeves and Forde's (2004) model of professional learning focusing on four aspects: reflection on practice, experiential learning, collaborative learning and cognitive development, relevant to all stages of career development. There are similarities between the design principles of this degree and the model recently developed by the Scottish College for Educational Leadership (SCEL 2015) which focuses upon career-long professional learning.

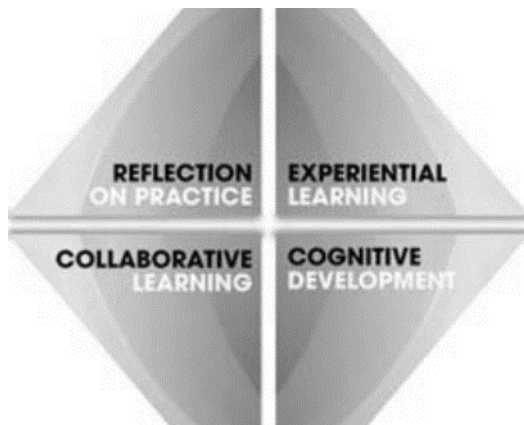


Figure 2. Model of professional Learning (SCEL Framework 2015).

The model above highlights the importance of practitioners as reflective, accomplished and enquiring professionals with the knowledge and experience to engage with the complexities of practice and able to shape and lead change. This aligns with the view of leadership of Mourshed et al. (2010), which recognises the importance of 'bottom-up' developments and professional autonomy as intrinsic to quality enhancement.

The international context

Developments in Scotland mirror those across the UK, which are influenced by the same research, reviews and reports, such as Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2006, 2015) and Sylva et al's (2004) Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE). These emphasise the importance of early years education. Oberhuemer (2013) argues that it is widely recognised globally that sustained professional development beyond initial qualifications is needed for ECEC staff. This reflects rapid social and political changes and current research.

Simultaneously, international literature on educational leadership highlights new conceptualisations of distributed leadership. The OECD (2012) report advocates that professional development should be 'ongoing, career-staged and seamless' (p.26). The need is for high quality professional development across all stages of the career trajectory. Leadership is one aspect of professionalism; others are pedagogical expertise, knowledge of curriculum development and critical reflection.

There are marked differences between countries in their approach to the care and education of very young children and to the qualifications and roles of staff. There are, however, commonalities or recurring themes. One is a developing and growing understanding of the importance of early childhood to later outcomes. The second is the economic argument for investing in early childhood care and education and the third is the role of a qualified workforce. Urban (2010) citing Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002), Dalli (2008), Oberhuemer (2005) and OECD (2006), concludes that there is an international consensus that the workforce is instrumental in achieving the ambitious policy goals, in terms of increasing both quantity and quality of provision.

From a study in Sweden by Kuisma and Sandberg (2008) it is evident that currently more than 50% of the childcare workforce is qualified to degree level. Swedish society views the status of preschool education as a vitally important influence on lifelong learning. This is in line with current Scottish Government thinking and reflects a changing picture in terms of qualifications with increasing numbers of graduates in the workforce. Similarly in New Zealand, Cherrington and Thornton (2013) argue that systematic, sustained and funded approaches to CPD are likely to promote in-depth reflective and critical thinking.

However, Oberhuemer (2005, 12) acknowledges the possible threat to professional autonomy through the introduction of frameworks for the ECEC workforce who 'need to be encouraged to see themselves as interpreters and not as mere implementers of curricular frameworks.' Similar to the EPPE study (2004) she sees the raising of qualifications for ECEC workers as vital in the process of enabling them to be seen as professionals who interpret frameworks rather than technicians who implement them. Oberhuemer concludes that there is a strong link between the quality of the workforce and each country's aspiration for a high quality system of early education and care.

Models of quality professional development

The professional development model (Figure 1) of work based learning in Scotland for raising the level of qualifications of ECEC workers and establishing a degree-led workforce is contained within the Standard for Childhood Practice (QAA, 2007, 2015) combined with SSSC registration. This is the key to the

integration of children's services and professionalisation of the workforce. This model is embedded in the policy and socio-political context of the Early Years Framework (EYF) (2009) which seeks to maximise positive opportunities for children to have the best start in life.

The establishment of this Standard (QAA 2007, 2015) requires all 'lead practitioners' to be enrolled on a course of study that will lead to a recognised degree level qualification. Evidence that this level of academic achievement has made a difference is supported by the Nutbrown Review (2012b) for England and Education Scotland (2012) in Scotland. These two initiatives have been influenced by the same research, reviews and reports such as EPPE (2004) and the Millennium Cohort Study (ESRC 2012) which indicated that the best outcomes for children would be achieved by higher qualified staff. Engagement with the Standard for Childhood Practice (2007, 2015) underpins staff development and training for this sector.

A further relevant professional development content model which provides a tool for analysis is the Cherrington and Thornton (2013) view of degree level effective professional learning. This considers how to develop higher level skills (critical reflection, interactive skills, coping with conflict) and knowledge (pedagogic content knowledge and theory) and a willingness to engage in critical reflection. This reflects Oberhuemer's (2005, 14) conceptualisation of early childhood professionals as 'playing a vital and valued role, and as one of social, cultural, educational and political significance.'

Another model originates from a New Zealand programme of research, Best Evidence Synthesis, (Mitchell and Cubey 2003) which synthesises a wide range of qualitative and quantitative data from studies and relevant literature of effective pedagogy and practice in the early years. It defines a framework of eight characteristics for quality professional development. In addition the framework is supported by a number of structural features which underpin the provision of professional development such as duration and intensity, the student disposition, the tutors and mentors and the organisation which combine to influence the effectiveness of the learning. Although this synthesis is drawn from an early years background it may have significance for CPD in other professions.

Adams (2008) draws comparisons with healthcare following the decision to raise nursing qualifications to degree level and the ensuing tension on the part of doctors not wishing to relinquish 'control'. Sandberg et al. (2007) discuss similar control issues in Sweden between pre-school teachers and day-care staff. However within an early years context both Adams (2008) and Nutbrown (2012a) suggest that the many job titles (nursery nurse, nursery assistant, early years practitioner, play-worker, out of school carer) 'provide fertile ground for a possible fragmentation of the concept of an early years profession' (2012, p. 200). Education Scotland (2012) suggests that a mix of qualifications particularly between non-teaching and teaching staff with an early years specialism promotes the best outcomes for children.

Within the models of quality development there are several similarities. All favour long term sustained and accredited CPD and are derived from government initiatives in relation to the childhood curriculum. All share a core element of commitment to change through professional action and so are applicable to other professions bringing together personal and professional growth and pedagogy. These national unified approaches can be used across several professions to promote a common understanding. All build upon workplace practice through active engagement and inbuilt critical reflection leading to improvement.

Summary

There is limited evidence of relevant models being used to analyse the impact of degree level, work-based CPD for the ECEC workforce. While recognising that academic qualifications in themselves do not ensure quality of practice, the study examines the structure and nature of student learning on the BACP.

The aim of this research is to question the impact on professional and personal development of participants under the headings of:

- values and professional commitment
- knowledge and understanding
- skills and abilities

Methodology

The main aim while exploring this model of CPD was to identify benefits to personal and professional development as experienced by the students. A subsequent analysis was carried out using three models of professional development. Throughout it was necessary to be aware of any personal bias by the researchers that might influence the interpretation of possible meanings.

Design

This was a small scale 'action research' study. Although not 'classroom based', it provided a deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon: how students viewed their participation on a degree that they are, in many cases, required to undertake in order to remain in employment. Another important consideration was to find out what students thought about their experience and this information would be more easily accessible through the application of a variety of qualitative data gathering instruments.

From this point of view, it is justified to describe this as action research, despite the misgivings of for example, Wilson (2012) who would agree that an action has been carried out but doubts whether this action would qualify as 'research'. Elliot (2009) on the other hand, makes the distinction that research in education is viewed as a form of practical philosophy that can unify theory, practice and educational research. The latter is described as research carried out by practitioners with the aim of improving practice through compliance with ethically acceptable action. This project falls into the category of educational research as the end result could certainly be used to influence future provision of the degree, in terms of content and also modes of delivery and organisation.

The research used a qualitative descriptive design with a phenomenographic approach. Patton (1990, 71) describes this approach as, 'one that is focused on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience'. Marton (1981) defines phenomenology as being concerned with how individuals perceive their experience and a phenomenographic approach as being concerned with a comparison of perceptions by individuals sharing a common experience. This type of approach was adopted because the research focused on the perceptions of learning and affective experiences identified while undertaking the degree. Central to the

phenomenographic approach is the variation in the way people conceptualise their experience in relation to their environment, which O'Leary (2014, 137) describes as the 'lived experience – what it feels like for those subject to the experience'. She goes on to explain that for people undertaking adult education, one of the key premises to bear in mind is a necessity to start from where people are. The researchers had all previously worked on initial qualification programmes for the early years workforce in further education colleges and therefore had an excellent awareness of the route travelled by many students. O'Leary (2014) further proposes that the purpose of any such study should be to provide a richness of information, gathered from interviews and texts. Therefore, analysis of individual assessment scripts, written student feedback from questionnaires and face-to-face interviews were considered appropriate methods to investigate how a person might conceptualise their learning experience in relation to their work in childhood practice.

Participants

The sample was broad enough to allow for realistic general references to a parent population, large enough to enable the analysis to be conducted and yet small enough to be manageable (O'Leary 2014), based on a purposive sample of childhood practitioners, 35 in total, all of whom were completing a final unit and working across Scotland, reflecting urban and rural locations. A unit was selected from each university, which demonstrated students' knowledge and skills in developing children's learning, leadership and reflection. Seventeen students representing 50% of those eligible volunteered to take part in the interviews. The students from the 2010-11 cohort (35) were invited to take part based on random sampling of those who agreed to participate. All were female, reflecting the current composition of the early years workforce (SSSC data, 2015: 96% females and 4% males), aged between 22 and 57 years and had been working in the sector for between 3 and 40 years.

Measures

From the students who agreed to take part, a sample of four participant scripts from each university was chosen, in order to reflect a wide range of topics.

The researchers decided, based on the Standard for Childhood Practice (2007, 2015), to focus on the main aspects:

- skills and abilities, which included leadership, management and collaborative working,
- knowledge and understanding, which included current theory and practice,
- values and personal commitment, which included personal and professional reflection.

All 12 scripts were read independently by each researcher. Comments or reflections providing evidence in support of the three bullet points above were colour coded. Following this, a data reduction exercise took place where the team met and reviewed the coded scripts and identified key themes.

In accordance with Roberts-Holmes' (2011) views on triangulation, all of the original cohort of students were invited to take part in interviews which were carried out in relation to the emerging key themes of: leadership skills; research skills; dissemination of professional knowledge and understanding; values and beliefs; and self-evaluation and reflection.

The students who volunteered to be interviewed were not necessarily the authors of the analysed scripts and the interviewer was from a different university, further increasing validity as the interview was unknown and less likely to be perceived within any existing staff student power structure (Mukherji and Albon 2010).

The interviews took the form of 'learning conversations' which share a common theme of the learner at the heart of the process. Laurillard et al. (2000) state that this strategy must be discursive, adaptive, iterative and reflective and that it must relate to the learner's immediate context. For this reason, the participating students were given the choice of taking part in these learning conversations in the workplace, rather than travelling to the university. The workplace represents the student's immediate context where learning will have impacted.

The semi-structured interview schedule had key prompts to allow flexibility (Kvale 1997) for the learning conversations to encourage flow and to provide space for the interviewees to develop their thinking. The timing allowed

one calendar year to have elapsed since undertaking the unit and this is supported by Sandberg et al. (2007) and Burchell et al. (2002) in terms of the need for distance to allow internalisation and longer term reflection on practice.

The nine interviews were subsequently transcribed and returned to the students for further editing. This process allowed participants to verify that the transcriptions correctly represented the 'learning conversation' and gave the opportunity to add further comments or expand as a result of reflection.

The process of data analysis and reduction of the transcribed interviews was repeated and compared with the original data set. Using the same colour coded system as above, a final data reduction exercise produced key statements from all the data sets.

In parallel, across all providers, BACP stakeholder feedback was sought from all students in their final year or recent graduates to provide evidence of personal and professional development for the awarding body (SSSC). The qualitative written feedback focused on the key areas of personal and professional reflection on practice. Students were asked to provide examples of the impact in these areas.

The data reduction exercises resulted in 30 key statements being identified. Subsequent analysis was carried out using the three models of professional development. The first model was the Standard for Childhood Practice (QAA 2007, 2015) which is the subject benchmark statements underpinning the degree. The established models of Mitchel and Cubey (2003) and Cherrington and Thornton (2013) were chosen because their use was for the similar context of strengthening the evidence base which informs policy and practice in New Zealand. The models were used as a catalyst for ongoing improvement in education which mirrors the motivation of the introduction of the BACP in Scotland. The data set of triangulated statements was matched to the features of the three models. Some statements matched to more than one feature and were expressed as a percentage of the total number of responses utilised resulting in the percentages of concordance being calculated. The data was then analysed in relation to three models of professional development:

Model 1: Main aspects of professional development (Figure1) (QAA 2007, 2015)

Model 2: Best evidence synthesis (BES) (Mitchell and Cubey 2003)

Model 3: Characteristics of effective professional learning, (Cherrington and Thornton 2013).

Ethical considerations

All participants who had completed the chosen unit of study were asked whether they wished to be involved in the research and to return the permission form if they gave their consent. All student scripts were marked and graded before the research was undertaken. Another ethical consideration raised was through the script content being aligned to an assessment rubric and the desire of students to pass assignments possibly making the content reflect success criteria and not their real views. The motivation for using this unit was that it had the least explicit teaching contained within it on the part of the university and hence would be experienced by students as a unit likely to offer a greater level of choice for students. Any bias was further reduced by the fact that the students were interviewed by a member of staff from another university and therefore not known within their own student-staff hierarchical context.

Findings

The key statements data was analysed against the theoretical frameworks employed by the three models. The findings revealed that characteristics identified in these models were evident in the degree. The data represents student' perspectives from 35 questionnaires, 12 assignments and 9 interviews.

Model 1: The Standard for Childhood Practice (QAA 2007, 2015)

This model is the benchmark and professional development framework upon which the degree is based.

Professional skills and abilities (29% response rate)

Knowledge in relationship to leadership and management became explicit rather than implicit and as a result facilitated changes in practice. For example, one student wrote: 'On reflection, having undertaken the research project, I judge myself to have participative leadership skills as I included one or more employees in decision making, allowing them to become part of the team. This

allowed me to gain the respect of staff and make better decisions' (Student Assignment). The development of leadership skills through knowledge and understanding of theories and concepts of leadership styles and management was frequently reported.

All the students conducted research as part of their degree and now have the confidence to continue to undertake research as an integral part of their practice. This was evident from statements such as: 'Now have the knowledge to conduct research, action planning, data gathering and analysis, evaluation and reflection. I now use these skills within many aspects of my role' (Student Interview). Action research was often used as a basis for improving practice using involving children, other staff and parents. Promoting collaboration within and out with the setting is reflected in programme materials and is evident in: 'Supported a collegiate approach to promote professional development of whole staff team; sharing of theoretical knowledge has improved how we support children's learning and development' (Student Questionnaire).

Professional knowledge and understanding (32% response rate)

From knowledge and understanding of current theory students became aware of being able to justify their practice: 'Have a better understanding of not just how to do things but why we do things/ debate issues to gain a better outcome (Student Questionnaire). Students perceive that undertaking the degree has equipped them with the knowledge and confidence to justify and debate their practice: 'More focused on what is required for successful learning and creating stimulating nursery environment for children to develop prior learning as well as learning new exciting experiences and skills' (Student Questionnaire). There is awareness of disseminating professional knowledge and understanding in promoting the development of whole staff teams. Frequently recorded comments included the 'ability to see situations from more angles; cascade down to staff; greater knowledge of childhood which gives me confidence to talk about it' (Student Interview).

Professional values and personal commitment (57% response rate)

This feature had the highest response rate. Students and staff teams were encouraged by the degree programmes to question values and beliefs which underpin practice. One student wrote of the importance of 'encouraging staff to reflect on their own practice by seeing it from a different perspective' (Student Assignment).

Increased awareness of reflection as a tool to improve practice is a core aspect of the degree. Assignments were generally reflective, for example: 'I will use the resource to continue to reflect and evaluate my practice and continue to develop my professional skills. This will support me in continuing to provide and ensure that a high quality of service is provided and that I continue to identify areas that need further development or that I carry out well' (Student Assignment).

All forms of data provided evidence of increased confidence: '..... have given me confidence and reassurance that my understanding of the benefits of encouraging and supporting children in challenging their abilities and taking calculated risks is very beneficial' (Student Assignment).

Model 2: Best Evidence Synthesis (BES), (Mitchell and Cubey 2003)

Further analysis used Mitchell and Cubey's (2003) eight characteristics of quality professional development. The 30 statements were matched to the BES characteristics:

- (1) incorporates participants' own aspirations, skills, knowledge and understanding into the learning context:
'Gained a great deal of knowledge and understanding of theories and concepts of leadership styles & management. I consider how I interact with staff and within my role advise and encourage others in how to effectively lead our workforce' (Student Interview).
- (2) provides theoretical and content knowledge and information about alternative practices:
'The reading undertaken in my literature review provided me with a developed knowledge and understanding which led me to confidently undertake my research' (Student Interview).
- (3) participants are involved in investigating pedagogy within their own settings:
'More aware of how I influence children's learning and use evaluation

- and reflection to support and extend learning' (Student Interview).
- (4) participants analyse data from their own settings:
- 'Now having shared my knowledge and demonstrated a variety of techniques, I feel that most of the team are now quite eager to continue with introducing...' (Student Assignment).
- (5) provokes critical reflection; enabling participants to investigate and challenge assumptions and extend their thinking is a core aspect:
- 'As the leader this was the first chance I had to be a reflective practitioner, taking a step back and having a smaller goal benefited the staff and the action research as a whole' (Student Assignment).
- (6) supports educational practice that is inclusive of diverse children and families:
- 'From my own research and professional perspective I can see the benefits of working with both the children and families in their community and also at a developmental nursery, where they can receive all their early intervention from different professionals under one roof' (Student Assignment).
- (7) helps participants to change educational practice, beliefs, understanding and/or attitudes:
- 'I believe that I have developed in confidence both personally and professionally' (Student Interview).
- (8) helps participants to gain awareness of their own thinking, actions and influence:
- 'Supported a collegiate approach to promote professional development of whole staff team; sharing of theoretical knowledge has improved how we support children's learning and development' (Student Questionnaire).

Model 3: Characteristics of effective professional learning (Cherrington and Thornton 2013)

The process above was repeated suggesting effective professional learning at degree level helps to develop:

- (1) metacognitive skills (critical reflection, interactive skills, coping with conflict):
- 'It has been so worthwhile not just for me but for other staff members. It brought us together as a team (which can be challenging to do regularly) because we needed to discuss how best to approach and introduce particular activities on a regular basis and give feedback on how we felt they went' (Student Interview).

(2) knowledge (pedagogical content knowledge, theory):

The students acknowledged that a collaborative, shared approach to leadership helped each team member grow progressively in confidence and knowledge (Student Interviews).

There was a general consensus that the degree had developed knowledge and understanding of pedagogical approaches resulting in critical reflection on practice and empowerment to justify the importance of play and creativity as the focus of learning (Student Interviews).

‘I have the ability to listen more to the child and take account of child’s point of view’ (Student Questionnaire).

(3) willingness to engage in critical reflection on practice:

‘Professionally I have gained immensely from undertaking not only this research but the entire programme. I now consider myself to be a reflective practitioner and I have developed my research skills, communication skills, management skills and confidence and consolidated my knowledge and understanding of parental involvement and a host of other areas. I have a sound knowledge of the processes involved in research and in the methods. Personally, I have gained confidence in myself and my abilities’ (Student Interview).

Using these characteristics to analyse the responses shows that the BACP degree has developed these aspects of professional learning, higher level interactive skills and pedagogical content, with a slight emphasis on reflection on practice.

Table 1 shows the percentage of statements matched across the three models. These are based on the number of statements matched to a feature as expressed as a percentage of the total. Statements are not exclusive to individual features of the models. They are represented more than once in the table, hence the percentages for each model do to not add up to 100%.

Table 1. Data to support matches across the three models

	Model 1:	Model 2:	Model 3:
	The Standard for Childhood Practice (2007, 2015)	Mitchell ad Cubey (2003)	Cherrington and Thornton (2013)

Professional skills and abilities	Leadership and management Collaborative working 29%	8. Help participants gain awareness of own thinking, actions and influence; 6. Supports educational practice that is inclusive of diverse children and families; 33%	Higher level Skills (critical reflection, interactive skills, coping with conflict) 33%
Knowledge and understanding	Current theory and practice 32%	1. Incorporation of students own skills and knowledge into the learning context; 2. Provides theoretical and content knowledge and information about alternative practices; 23%	Knowledge (pedagogic content knowledge, theory) 37%
Professional values and personal commitment	Personal reflection Professional reflection 57%	4. Participants analyse data from their own settings to create revised understanding; 3. Involved in investigating of pedagogy in own setting; 5. Provokes critical reflection; enabling participants to investigate and challenge assumptions; 7. Helps participants to change educational practice, beliefs, understanding and/or attitudes;	Critical reflection on practice 37%

		60%	
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Table 1 shows that key statements most frequently relate to personal and professional reflection and growth. However closer examination indicates that this is underpinned by increased knowledge and understanding and enhanced skills.

Limitations of the data

Qualitative data analysis and matching of statements are subject to individual interpretation contributing an aspect of potential inconsistency. O'Leary (2014) indicates this type of research is based on distillation of meaningful statements which can form the basis for further exploration of concepts; in this case, through interviews. These interviews were conducted by childcare professionals who may have introduced bias through unconscious leading of the questioning. Participating students self-selected and were predominantly positively predisposed to the degree which may not be representative of the whole cohort.

Discussion

Personal Development and Professional Growth

The initial aim was to examine the personal and professional development of participants. Effective CPD needs to develop personal, social and performance domains within practitioners (Vermunt and Endedijk, 2011). The second aim was to carry out an analysis of the study in childhood practice in relation to three existing models of professional development.

The first model was the Standard for Childhood Practice (QAA 2007, 2015), developed in response to aims set by Scottish Government to enhance the status of Early Learning and Childcare. This reflects the views of Urban (2010) citing Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002), Dalli (2008), Oberhuemer (2005) and OECD (2006), who agree that interlinked elements of professional and personal values and commitment, knowledge and understanding and skills and abilities, facilitate professional action in the workplace. The BACP structure allows the possibility of achieving a work-based professional degree.

Our findings indicate a change in mindset over time for most students, facilitated by personal and professional reflection. Since 2011, managers in

care and education settings must hold a BACP degree or equivalent. The BACP is a single integrated qualification with the aim of strengthening leadership in early learning and childcare settings. The structure and method of delivery require students to reflect and make connections between theory and practice, combining competence demonstrated in the workplace with academic rigour. This is in contrast with the design principles for most undergraduate degrees where beginners are exposed to theory first, followed by practice.

This study has provided evidence to support enhanced personal development and professional growth with the overarching theme being increased confidence in the professional role. According to Vermunt and Endedijk (2011) personal and contextual factors affect the learning pattern of teachers in their professional development. Personal factors include self-esteem, interest in the profession, love of learning and professional identity. Contextual factors include pedagogy, leadership for learning, collaborative culture and whether the school is open to innovation. The study has highlighted that these personal and contextual factors all feature in the findings.

Evidence from Education Scotland (2012, 9) report states:

Staff have a clearer understanding of child development and feel more confident and motivated in delivering the curriculum. We know that staff are using their new knowledge and skills to improve learning for children, e.g. outdoor learning. They are delivering more child-led learning which promotes deeper and challenging learning experiences.

The Mitchell and Cubey (2003) BES model with its eight characteristics of effective professional development provided a framework against which to measure evidence of quality. Analysis of student statements indicates that the BACP promotes development across all eight characteristics with strengths in theory, changing attitudes and beliefs and a willingness to engage in critical reflection.

Cherrington and Thornton's (2013) model describes characteristics of effective professional learning, higher level interactive skills, pedagogical content and reflection on practice. This aligns with Education Scotland (2012) where staff reported that study has made them more analytical, developed confidence and an enquiring disposition resulting in reflexivity in relation to practice. Having a critical understanding of concepts of theories and curriculum

and pedagogy is a benchmark for Standard for Childhood Practice (QAA, 2015) and is evidenced in the findings in relation to professional knowledge and understanding.

The findings support Oberhuemer's (2005) views that a system of early education and care is dependent on the quality and level of qualifications of the workforce. This is also supported by Education Scotland (2012) as above.

Mitchell and Cubey's (2003) BES links to educational practice that is inclusive of diverse children and families. From BACP interviews students indicated that they can build positive relationships, so that parents feel included as partners in their children's learning.

Quality professional development

Several divergent themes have emerged with implications for CPD and practice. Dahlberg et al. (2007) question the correlation between increased quality of provision as a result of further qualifications taken as part of the drive to professionalise the workforce. However, Siraj Blatchford et al. (2002), Dalli (2008) and Oberhuemer (2005) support the notion that to increase quality many countries have been professionalising the workforce and this has been effective to a certain extent OECD (2009). Urban (2008) identifies the merging of quality and professionalism as a concept to achieve policy goals. Scottish Government goals for a qualified, trained and skilled workforce are well supported by the findings of Education Scotland (2012) and this study. Previously CPD for the ECEC workforce would tend to be short term and non-credit bearing. However, the BACP provides students with opportunities to develop their professional expertise and requires them to read professional literature. Over a sustained period, through carrying out assignments in the workplace, students demonstrate links between theory and practice.

Education Scotland (2012) and Davis et al (2014) indicate that the BACP now has links to positive outcomes for children and families. This supports the findings of Sylva et al (2004) that better qualified people educating and caring for children in the early years results in better outcomes for those children and society. Our evidence shows there is increased empathy with children, building from what they already know, allowing the child to have a voice and the provision of quality play experiences based on children's interests.

This research indicates that implementation of the BACP provides a quality model for CPD because it is sustained over time, is based on and requires reflection and possible change to practice. It is work based and is highly contextualised. This has led to the development of the following model which synthesises the research literature and previous models identified.

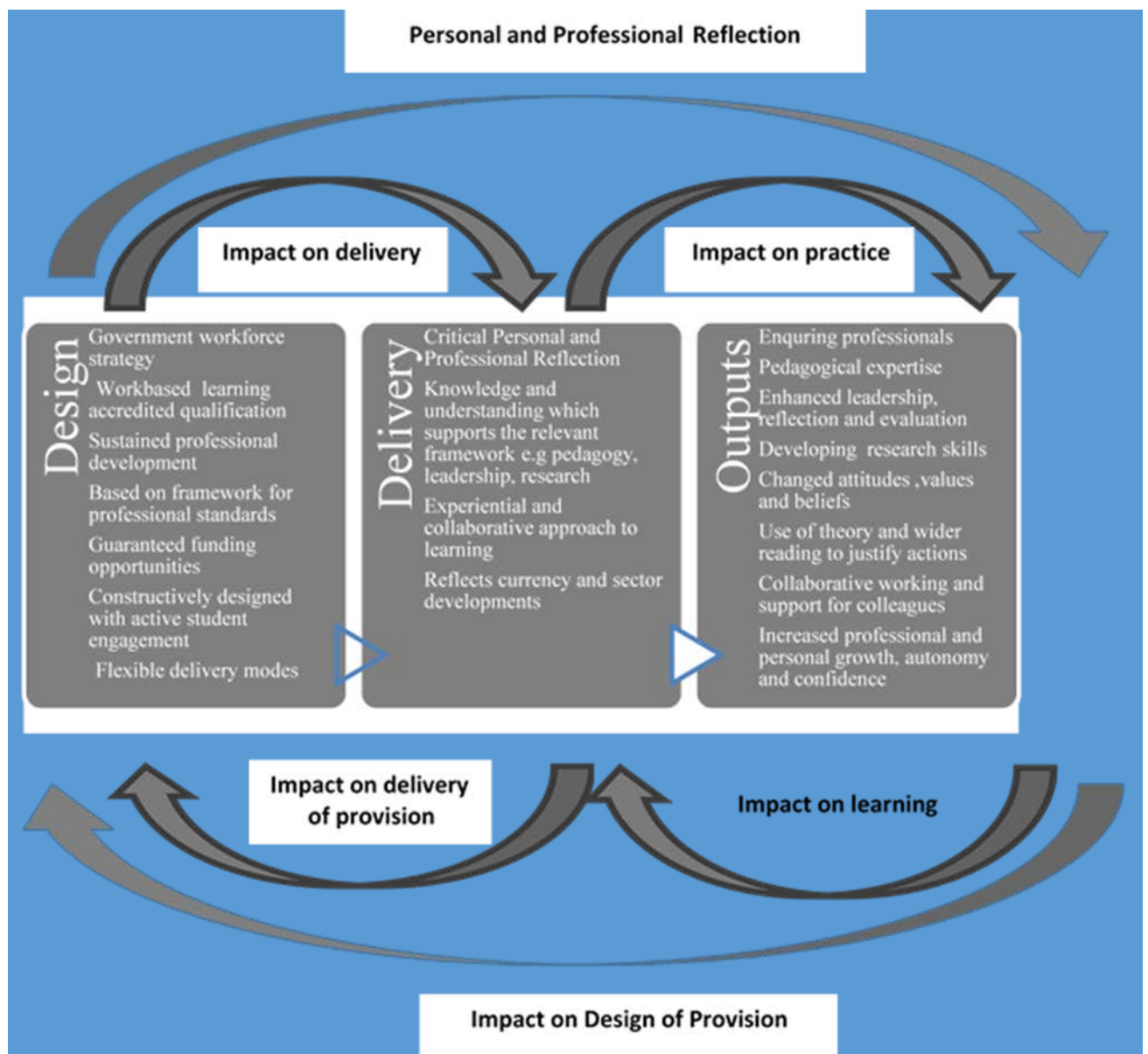


Figure 3. Model of key features of effective continuous professional development

This model is dynamic and interrelated and because it is built upon cycles of reflection has the ability to adapt and respond to changes in the environment. It brings together the underpinning aspects common to the design of the degree with the approach to delivery and the resultant outputs. The model is interactive where the outputs feed future delivery and the review of design. Delivery is influenced by changes in design which impact through personal and professional reflection of the students experience and learning. Vermunt and Endedijk (2011) believe that effective CPD also needs to take into consideration key areas of development, especially in relation to personal, social and professional aspects of practice in order to improve learning processes and outcomes.

This paper asserts that the above model could be applicable to a range of other professions. It is the contention that many of the problems in current practice for CPD could be overcome if the key features of effective continuous development were incorporated in the design and delivery alongside the feedback mechanisms which are part of the model. The BACP differs from the 'training course' model described by Kennedy (2005) with a focus on transmission of skills and expert delivery. The BACP promotes professional autonomy through allowing knowledge to become explicit as opposed to implicit and to allow the students to progress from reflection on their own practice to being able to situate this reflection within a wider community of practice (Raelin 2010). This was clearly demonstrated in an interview with a nursery manager who had continued to rely on her student 'community' beyond graduation and used it as a reference or support group. Raelin suggests that reflection on practice is the critical and defining characteristic of work-based learning and this was frequently named by students as important.

The BACP has changed the landscape of CPD provision for ECEC workers from traditional short course provision to sustained in-depth CPD and the opportunity for academic progression. The majority of students are eligible for government funding which is a necessity given the characteristics of the cohort.

All models argue for systematic, planned, coordinated, sustained and in-depth approaches within a framework of ongoing critical reflection. The findings from this study suggest that the BACP work-based degree does provide this

clear structure. The SCEL model of professional learning (2015) and the Framework for Educational Leadership (SSSC 2015) embrace the need for leadership CPD relevant to all stages of career development.

The approaches underpinning this type of CPD, and highlighted in the other models, also have relevance to other professional development programmes e.g. teaching and nursing professions. In particular the BES characteristics give a clear structure for quality professional learning which encourages higher level skills, knowledge and engagement in ongoing critical reflection leading to improvement of practice.

Limitations of the study

While this study fills a gap in current research about childhood practice professional learning some limitations must be acknowledged. This study represents the findings from three universities out of seven currently delivering the degree and students self-selected to take part, which may not be representative of the whole group. However, concordance with Education Scotland (2012) may mitigate this point to some extent, although Davis et al. (2014) was critical of the narrowness of the scope of the survey.

The findings from this study highlight many positive aspects in terms of personal and professional growth and impact on practice for BACP graduates. However, ECEC is a sub-stream of a highly stratified professional system and evidence from student interviews revealed dissatisfaction with role recognition and reward.

Conclusion

Quality work-based professional development as exemplified by the BACP, founded on a social constructivist approach, supports the development of higher level skills in personal and professional development, including leadership skills. Burchell et al. (2002) state that the impact of one person's CPD can be significant for others within that context by informal means of disseminating information through low-level chat with colleagues while undertaking the programme. The BACP has encouraged students to actively engage in co-constructing the curriculum with children, other staff and parents. It has also

promoted professional autonomy through increased confidence and enquiry led learning.

From the commonalities of findings between the three universities in the study, it was evident that the BACP had contributed to effective professional learning and development. Participants developed skills and characteristics identified by Cherrington and Thornton (2013) and Mitchell and Cubey (2003), for example, critical reflection and knowledge resulting in innovative and enquiring professionals. They also developed the leadership attributes from the SCEL model of professional learning (Figure 2).

The commonalities of personal and professional development were evidenced in relation to improved research and leadership skills, increased theoretical knowledge, evidence of self-evaluation and ongoing reflection, together with many examples of innovative practice. The predominant theme was increased confidence resulting from professional learning and development acting as a driving force to improve practice. The findings sit well within the wider international consensus that professionalisation of the workforce is instrumental to promoting positive outcomes for children and families (Urban 2010).

The issues that emerge have relevance to other professional development programmes. The model of key features of effective CPD (Figure 3) could support a framework for effective CPD with attention being given to design and delivery. The interconnectivity between the design, delivery and outputs enriches the CPD process. CPD that draws on the evidence of quality professional learning which encourages higher level skills, knowledge and engagement in ongoing critical reflection is likely to lead to improvement of practice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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